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RESEARCH
BRIEF

Rebuilding Security Forces and Institutions in Iraq

In their planning for postwar stabilization and reconstruction in Iraq, the United States and its coalition partners had assumed a benign security environment and an Iraqi police force able to maintain order. Instead, the security environment deteriorated and what police and security forces remained were incapable of responding to rising criminality and political violence. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was confronted with the challenges of restoring order, rebuilding Iraqi security forces, and building security sector institutions, all on an abbreviated timeline, once the parties agreed in November 2003 to shift power from the coalition to the Iraqis by the end of June 2004. In a study for the U.S. Departments of Defense and State,[1] the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) examined the CPA's attempts to build forces and institutions in Iraq and, insofar as currently possible, draw lessons from that experience. The study's authors served with the CPA during its existence and were involved in policy development and implementation in the Iraqi security sector.

Successes and Failures

How far was the CPA able to advance its aim of building sustainable institutions that would contribute to the emergence of a secure and democratic Iraq? RAND researchers concluded the following:

- The coalition succeeded in helping Iraq's political leaders establish security institutions, most notably the Ministerial Committee for National Security (MCNS), which was continued under the Iraq Interim Government. However, there is little sign yet of the development of true coordination between ministries at working levels.
- In seeking to rebuild the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, the coalition focused on identifying

Abstract

The Coalition Provisional Authority's record at rebuilding Iraqi security forces and building security sector institutions was mixed. Among the problems was an emphasis on meeting short-term Iraqi security needs at the expense of long-term institution-building. In the future, progress must be measured by institutional capacity-building as much as by number of security forces fielded. In the current security environment, it will be up to the United States and its international partners to make sure that vital long-term goals stay on the Iraqi agenda.

appropriate personnel, which might prove wise if the ministry is allowed to mature. However, there are signs that it will remain weak, which bodes ill for civilian control of the military.

- With the dissolution by the coalition of all other security forces, the Iraqi Police Service became the ensurer of public safety and the lead Iraqi counterinsurgency force. It was not postured, trained, or equipped for these roles. This situation had improved a little by June 2004 and has continued to do so into the current year. However, the government institutions in Baghdad and in the provinces that oversee the police remain very weak.
- Critical ministries such as oil and electricity are deploying increasingly professional security forces to protect key facilities. However, the overall regulation of private security forces remains problematic.
- Judicial reforms, including the establishment of an independent judiciary, had made considerable progress under the coalition. However, efforts to fight organized crime and corruption have languished.

[1] The study was funded by the Department of Defense for the Coalition Provisional Authority. When the CPA was dissolved, sponsorship passed to the State Department.

- The coalition failed to develop an integrated, coordinated Iraqi intelligence apparatus. Such an apparatus could have been of great importance in the campaigns against the insurgency and organized crime.
- While the coalition instituted a stipend program for former members of the armed forces and appointed "clean" former officers to the security forces and ministries, the effort to reintegrate former combatants was insufficient to keep some former soldiers from joining the insurgency.

The research team summarized the CPA's mixed record by considering it at the levels of individuals, institutions, and integrative tendencies.

- At the level of individuals, the coalition undertook a major effort to remove Saddam-era officers and senior officials.
- Institutional reform has been patchy. Efforts were made to build the managerial capacity and to inculcate reformed practices within the new Ministry of Defense, but the Ministry of Interior was only marginally touched by reform efforts.
- Integration across the security sector and with the wider society is also a mixed story. The MCNS has been partially successful, but in general the coalition failed to overcome the rigid ministerial compartmentalization inherited from Saddam, and limited progress has been made to ensure legislative oversight of the security sector.

What Caused the Shortfalls?

The researchers concluded that the failures identified were the result of several problems underlying the CPA's approach to the Iraqi security sector:

- *A lack of worst-case and contingency planning.* This included, for example, the failure to prepare for contingencies such as the infiltration and intimidation of police forces, which required coalition troops to step back into the front line of security in key urban areas.
- *Structural constraints on rational policy development.* An early integrated approach to security sector development rapidly unraveled, and coordination was subsequently devalued and incentives to achieve it were not established.
- *Inability to mobilize funding and personnel inputs.* In most nation-building operations, mobilization of nonmilitary resources has been problematic. In Iraq, the scale of the operation and the security situation severely tested established mechanisms, and a reliance on untested mechanisms delayed the deployment of resources.

- *Emphasis on meeting the short-term needs of fielding Iraqi security forces at the expense of the long-term goals of institution-building.* Filling the immediate security vacuum involved measures such as rapidly recruiting police and civil defense personnel with minimal vetting and recruitment, as well as relying on tribes and militias, which were contrary to the coalition's long-term goal of engineering a sweeping reform of the nation's security sector.
- *Delays in working to ensure Iraqi ownership of the reform process.* Until November 2003, the coalition imported foreign expertise to manage Iraqi security affairs. It was only afterward that the coalition focused on developing Iraqi leadership and capacity. The result was patchy Iraqi ownership of reform, as well as limited capacity in the security sector institutions.
- *Ambiguity in long-term security relationships.* It has not been clear that the coalition would guarantee protection for Iraqis against external aggression for the foreseeable future, which would allow Iraq to concentrate on building internal security forces.

Implications for the Future

The NDRI team argued that the shortfalls identified must be addressed if the Iraqi security sector is to develop into an effective and accountable part of the nation's governance framework. It will be critical for Iraq's future that Iraqi leaders and their international advisors not become mesmerized by the fielding of large numbers of security forces. While numbers are important, it will be vital to invest in the intangibles that cannot be so easily quantified, such as

- Development of joint judicial and police investigatory capabilities
- Development of national security institutions, including the ministries of Defense and Interior
- Sustained support to the justice sector, including anticorruption programs.

Another important need is for the Iraqi government at the highest levels to develop the capacity to make and implement security policy. Iraq's leaders lack the institutional capacity to formulate and execute policy, to systematically examine options, and to plan for the long term. In particular, the emerging Iraqi polity needs to give serious thought to such large issues as the future of the security sector in terms of center-region relationships, state-society relationships, and the proportion of national resources allocated to security. The United States and its international partners must realize, however, that Iraqi ministers and senior officials are likely in the near term to be more focused on survival; so it will be up to this international partnership to ensure that long-term institution-building remains on the Iraqi agenda. ■

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